

BOARD OF TRADE PERFINS

John Nelson

In his article published in *Rundbrief 118, December 1999*, a translation of which appeared in *Perfin Society Bulletin 305*, Karl Louis makes several observations slanted towards the doubtful character of some Board of Trade perfins but stops short of a commitment to the theory that they were the subject of large-scale forgery. I am bound to say that nothing in his article persuades me to alter my opinion that all (Crown)/B.T perfins might well be genuine.

Karl Louis has, in recent exchange of letters, pointed out to me that the information contained in the Kohl handbook of 1930, to which he refers in his article, was contributed by the English philatelist, Stanley Seymour. Also that Seymour had based his comments on the work of Mr I.J Bernstein, published in *The Stamp Collectors' Annual, 1907*. It was on precisely the same work that Captain H.T.Jackson developed his arguments alleging wholesale Board of Trade perfin forgery in his *Stamp Collecting* articles of December 1962.

Bernstein himself made no reference to forgery at all. What he did was to lay down, on the basis of certain unspecified "official information available", the 'ground rules' which were to become the test of authenticity of these official perfins. He did, however, manage to build in a measure of flexibility. According to Bernstein:

- ❖ The stamps were first used on **January 27th 1882**, but in order to explain the inconvenient existence of a (Crown)/B.T perforated 2d blue, plate 15, which was superseded by the 2d rose on December 2nd 1880,

he suggests that *"it is evident that the stamps were prepared some months before issue "*.

- ❖ 2. The use of the stamps was discontinued on **May 14th 1904** "when all distinctive official stamps were finally abolished" (although he points out that a warrant for their preparation had not been necessary, thereby differentiating them from the *overprints* which were discontinued from the date mentioned.)
- ❖ 3. *Two, if not more*, perforating machines were employed during the twenty-three years the stamps were in use.

Where, then, did the idea that Board of Trade perfins had been forged come from? Neither Dr Ward, who alluded to forgeries at the 1926 Cambridge Philatelic Congress, or Mr Seymour in the 1930 Kohl handbook, offered a scrap of evidence to back up their bare assertions.

In my opinion there never was any evidence. I suggest that well after the publication of Bernstein's work various Board of Trade perfin items came to light which refused to comply with the 'ground rules' he had laid down. These items included stamps postmarked before and after Bernstein's dates and the output of a great many more different perforating dies than he had thought to exist.

To the conventional philatelist of the day, there was only one conclusion to be reached. That bogey-man of stamp collectors, the forger, had been hard at work

To give Captain Jackson his due, he was the first to have sufficient courage of conviction to try to put some flesh on the bare bones of the forgery theory. In earlier articles I have explained why I regard Jackson's

arguments to have been flawed. I have also explained why I consider the allegations of forgery to be no more than conjecture, based on inaccurate facts and half truths.

There can be no doubt that, as Karl Louis rightly states at two points in his article, little interest was, for years, taken by stamp collectors in Board of Trade perfins. In fact there was precious little interest taken in any stamps perforated with initials, which were regarded as damaged and thrown away by the million. It goes without saying that in bygone days a (Crown)/B.T perfin, riddled with 95 (and occasionally 96) holes, would have been propelled towards the rubbish bin faster than most.

I cannot agree with Mr Louis that any significant reduction in this already minimal level of interest could have been prompted by anything written in the 1930 Kohl handbook. Furthermore, the reasons why Stanley Gibbons declined to list them in their catalogues were not as he suggests, but as is made clear in *Gibbons Stamp Monthly*, November 1942 (Bulletin No.307 Pages 14/15). Here they said that official perfins were not in great demand, but made no reference to the existence of forgeries. They did however fear that, if perforated officials were listed, and attained wide popularity, the rarities among them *would be* extraordinarily easy to imitate. They could hardly have classed a (Crown)/B.T perfin as a rarity.

What I regard to be an excessive amount of importance is placed by Mr Louis, and others, on the small number of Board of Trade covers which are known to exist. There is no question that covers are rarely to be found but can anyone positively confirm that the stamps on all the covers that are known are perforated with Die 1?

Even if we assume they are all Die 1, they cannot be said to represent a sufficient sample to justify suspicions of forgery against all other dies. Mr

Louis' analysis of the material he has recorded shows that the items are principally parts of wrappers and covers addressed abroad to British Consuls, the Department of Foreign Affairs in Berne or the Almanac de Gotha. These would all have originated in Board of Trade departments with responsibility for overseas matters and it is no mystery that they should all be using the same Die 1 perfin.

When it comes to covers used by departments concerned with purely domestic British matters the situation is bleak indeed. Jackson refers to one, used by the Labour Department in 1897. The only other which comes to mind was posted in 1892 by the Storekeepers Department to a Cornwall address (Bulletin 265).

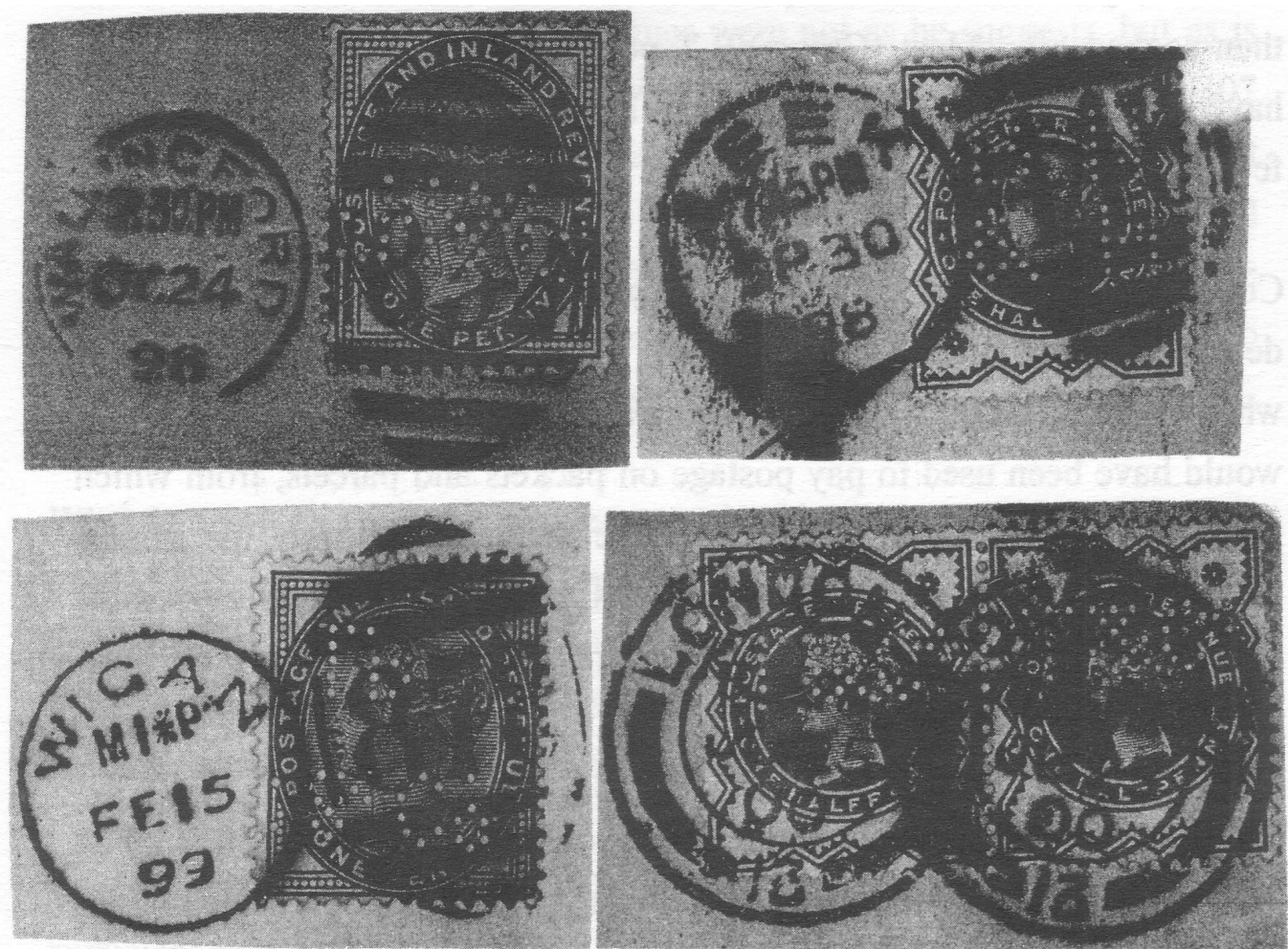
During the period when Board of Trade perfins were in use, stamp collectors just collected stamps which were torn or cut from covers and then soaked off. Most (Crown)/B.T perfins on cover, if noticed, would have been discarded at once without being cut off, so it is no surprise that few complete envelopes remain.

Collectors know that there is also a very clear predominance of the higher definitive values up to 1/- amongst the thousands of (Crown)/B.T perfins which exist off paper. Apart from paying foreign postage rates, they would have been used to pay postage on packets and parcels, from which the wrapping paper was scrapped by the recipient and only the stamps perhaps retained. The fact that so many (Crown)/B.T perfins survived the slaughter is some indication of the very considerable usage of these stamps by the Board of Trade.

The piece bearing six examples of the 1864 Penny Red, Plate 150, with an 1872 postmark, referred to by Karl Louis (also illustrated in Bulletin 283) is superb and in my opinion has all the credentials to confirm that it is

totally genuine. Maurice Harp has the die on a Penny Red, Plate 138, on piece postmarked 1873. Burkhart Beer has it on a 2d Blue, Plate 15. Who ever gave Mr Bernstein the starting date of January 1882 was, I believe, unaware that, somewhere else in the vastness of the Board of Trade, perfins had already been in use on a minor scale for nine years or so.

The 'no ink in the holes' argument mentioned by Karl Louis was not used by Jackson and by Edwards & Lucas, but it is fallacious. It is not an indication of an operation, (utterly futile it seems to me) involving soaking the stamps *off a piece*, perforating them with a counterfeit die and sticking them back on again. In reality the ink on an obliterator does not, as a general rule, penetrate holes which are clearly perforated in a stamp. I have in my collection many very common commercial perfins on piece with heavy cancellations, on which the holes are completely ink-free.



Karl Louis concludes his article by suggesting that my opinions are difficult to accept in view of the shortage of evidence. He overlooks the fact that I represent the defence, not the prosecution. It is those who allege or suspect forgery of Board of Trade perfins who have failed to present a coherent case. It is not enough to suggest that such things as shortage of covers, proliferation of different dies and holes that are free of ink, are evidence that something like half of these perfins still in existence today are forgeries.

I agree that we must continue to be on the look-out for Board of Trade perfin covers, but past results of the search give us little encouragement. In the meantime, perhaps someone could come up with a sensible explanation as to how anyone on earth could have thought it remotely possible to make a profit out of forging floods of copies of a perfin which was being collected by virtually no-one and thrown away by virtually everyone.

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